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CURRENT PROFILE

WILLIAM CASEY

Intelligence Chief With Nine Lives

The hounds of controversy once again are baying at his heels, but his job as America's spymaster is as safe as ever.

For the third time since Ronald Reagan put him in charge of the Central Intelligence Agency, lawmakers are demanding that William Casey quit or be fired. Walter Mondale endorsed the new call for Casey's scalp, a clamor that erupted upon word that the CIA had prepared a kidnap-and-assassination manual for anti-Communist guerrillas in Nicaragua.

Although National Security Adviser Robert McFarlane vowed that whoever was responsible for the controversial primer will be punished, no one expects Casey to step down. According to aides, the 71-year-old lawyer never read or even heard of the manual before it hit the headlines.

The rumpled and irascible grandson of an Irish immigrant has feuded with Congress since he came to Washington in 1971 to head Richard Nixon's Securities and Exchange Commission. Much of the bickering involved the fortune—last estimated at up to 14 million dollars—that Casey made as an investor and author of make-money books.

Not "unfit." Nearly every committee that has checked his qualifications for public office—first as chief of the SEC, then as under secretary of state, head of the Export-Import Bank and director of the CIA—has complained of misstatements, lapses of memory and reluctant disclosures of assets and clients. At one point, a Senate panel declared that the most it could say was that he was not "unfit" for the job.

Disclosure that Casey, in his first two years as CIA chief, made millions of dollars playing the stock and bond markets, produced an uproar. That storm subsided only when he put his investments in a blind trust.

Still another furor ensued when White House Chief of Staff James Baker swore under oath that Casey, while running Reagan's 1980 campaign, gave him a copy of Jimmy Carter's debate-briefing book. Not so, said Casey as the controversy faded into a still unresolved mystery.

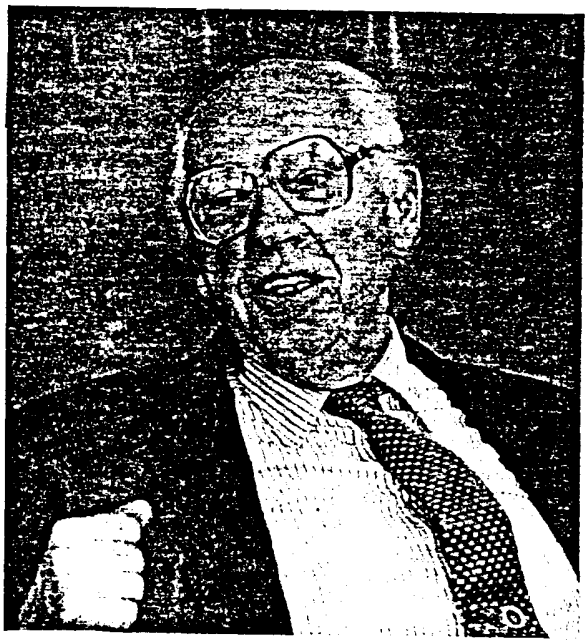
Last spring saw Casey's toughest test—a messy dispute over CIA mining of Nicaraguan harbors. That operation was aborted under fire from Congress.

Do the storms that envelop Casey bother Reagan? As recently as September, the CIA chief received this message from the White House: "You're my man at the CIA as long as I am President."

Casey has done exactly what Reagan wanted him to do: Reversed setbacks suffered in the anti-CIA wave that swept America after Watergate.

Casey's exploits as a coordinator of spy operations against Nazi Germany in World War II gave him a lifelong respect for the usefulness of covert actions, and he eagerly rejuvenated the CIA's clandestine operations.

The spymaster won budget hikes of up to 25 percent a year for the CIA, sharply boosted its covert-action section in staff and money and increased the number of national-intelligence-estimate papers from a scant dozen a year to nearly 60.



WARREN K. LEFFLER—USN&WR

"Get it done." One key White House official says: "When I ask Bill Casey for something, he will get it done and what he gives me will be as timely and short as it can be." Casey's own credo, outlined in a recent speech to CIA staff members: "Set tasks. Set deadlines. Make decisions. Act. Get it done and move on."

Declares Senator Barry Goldwater (R-Ariz.), chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee: "Casey has built the agency up until today young people are standing in line to join the CIA."

Other lawmakers challenge the "outstanding" rating Goldwater gives Casey. The CIA's Nicaraguan activities, says Senator Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.), have hurt the crucial bipartisan support that the CIA needs in Congress.

But it's a waste of time, Leahy says, to seek Casey's removal. "The President likes him . . . no matter how many screw-ups they make. So he's going to stay, and it becomes a moot point." □